

# International centres play a vital role

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In an age when confrontation and conflict seem too often to be the rule, the global network of international agricultural research centres is an outstanding example of what can be achieved through cooperation and collective effort.

Beginning with the establishment of the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines in 1962, the network has rapidly expanded until today it includes nine specialized institutions stretching around the globe from Nigeria to Peru. Between them the centres employ several hundred of the world's leading agricultural scientists, and they provide training for many more.

Although each centre is located in a different country, and each specializes in a specific field of research, their testing and development programs are carried out in many countries, and their findings are distributed world-wide. The centres also share a simple common objective: the vital transformation of agriculture in the tropics and to bring about a better future for the subsistence farmers and their families.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the network is the way in which it is funded. Once IRRI, the prototype centre, had demonstrated its effectiveness, the need for other such centres was apparent. However, the set-up cost of between \$5 million and \$20 million,

and annual operating costs of around \$5 million each, obviously put such expansion beyond the means of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, which had taken the initiative in supporting the establishment of IRRI.

After considerable discussion amongst potential donors, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research was formed in 1971. This is a voluntary association of national governments, regional development banks, private foundations, the Commission of the European Community, and the IDRC. It is sponsored by the World Bank, the FAO and the UN Development Programme.

The five major developing regions of the world also participate in the Group, each sending an elected representative. The Group meets quite informally twice a year to establish priorities for funding new research. Members are free to provide funds for some centres and not for others — in fact no centre attracts funds from all donors. The Group is supported by a Technical Advisory Committee — an assembly of 13 eminent scientists and economists drawn from both developed and developing countries.

Much of the research supported by the IDRC's Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Sciences Division is related, directly or indirectly, to the work of these specialized international centres. Dur-

ing the past year the Division contributed some \$2 million to the centres in direct support of their projects, and considerably more than that to fund projects at the national and regional level that are linked to the work of the centres.

The newest member of the network is the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, which was formally established last year with sites near Aleppo, Syria, and Tabriz, Iran. The centre will serve the last major agro-climatic region not previously covered by the network. The IDRC was a strong supporter of the new centre during the proposal stages, and has served as Executing Agency for the centre since 1975. The centre's acting director is a Canadian from the Prairies.

The IDRC also supports the international agricultural information centres that provide the network's vital communications links, and AGRIS, a computerized worldwide agricultural information system in which the centres play a vital role.

The work of the international agricultural research centres rarely makes headlines — good news rarely does. But for the rural peoples of the developing world they bring good news indeed: a sign that the era of neglect of the small-scale food farmer is at last coming to an end. □



IITA: International Institute for Tropical Agriculture  
ILRAD: International Laboratory for Research on Animal Diseases  
ILCA: International Livestock Centre for Africa  
ICARDA: International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas  
ICRISAT: International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics

IRRI: International Rice Research Institute  
CIMMYT: International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre  
CIAT: International Centre of Tropical Agriculture  
CIP: International Potato Centre